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AUTHOR Cleary, Ray
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ABSTRACT

A study examined how coordinators and management committees successfully manage adult education agencies in rural New South Wales (Australia) during periods of adverse economic conditions. The harsh economic background consisted of economic recession combined with a crippling drought, which led to fewer course enrollments and, therefore, decreased agency income. Individuals were interviewed from four rural adult education agencies, two deemed successful and two deemed marginal or nonsuccessful in their management. Data concerning the nature of the coordinator's administrative function in a successful adult education agency revealed that in regard to leadership, successful coordinators displayed more vigor and direction in their leadership qualities, displayed a more entrepreneurial spirit, had a more intuitive grasp of their field, and were more people oriented. Successful coordinators also possessed good communication skills and some degree of financial, economic, and personnel management skills. Concerning the nature of the management committee's administrative function in a successful adult education agency, three different functions were found: strong leadership provided by the chairperson; active recruitment of new members; and the seeking out of innovation and development. Data concerning the working relationship between the coordinator and the management committee in the successful adult education agency revealed two administrative requirements: an effective partnership between coordinator and management committee in the form of trust, cooperation and teamwork; and a parity of esteem between committee and coordinator rather than passive subordination. (Contains 11 references.) (TD)

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Ray Cleary, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

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'The old bush school': Research, Teaching and Learning need *Management* to Make Connections in Adult Education.

Ray Cleary, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

'Tis a queer old battered landmark that belongs to other years:
With the dog-leg fence around it, and its hat about its ears,
And the cow-bell in the gum tree, and the bucket and the stool,
There's a motley host of memories round that old bush school.
(John O'Brien: "The Old Bush School")

John O'Brien's poem 'The Old Bush School' portrays life in an Australian one-teacher rural school around 100 years ago. It depicts a public education which provided only the barest essentials. Life was tough for teacher and students. For both teaching and learning, resources were minimal. It was the teacher, the students and the stark desks and building, nothing else. The stress was on discipline and class control; there was no room for research or things academic. From this basic environment emerged the first adult education. By day the bush school was used to teach children; by night it was used to teach their parents. The day-time teacher was also the teacher of the adults at night. The classes focussed on literacy and numeracy.

Today the scene in adult education is vastly different, and the change has been brought about largely through the way in which adult education has been managed. Whenever adult education is discussed in the context of 'research, teaching and learning,' mention must be made of 'management.' All these four aspects must be linked.

This paper is prefaced by the picture of 'The Old Bush School' in order to illustrate the progress which has been made since the earliest days of adult education - progress made possible by the calibre of past and present day management. A case will here be made to justify the inclusion of 'management' with the concepts of 'research, teaching and learning,' with an account of some recent research conducted in Australia. This research gives an indication of the role of management in successful rural adult education agencies, and points the way for other agencies to become more successful in their operations. This in turn assists the teaching process and facilitates better learning for the students. This paper is concerned with the factor of successful management in adult education research.

If *Research, Teaching, Learning: Making Connections in the Education of Adults* be viewed as an equation, a case can be made that the equation lacks one vital component: 'Management.' In Australia it is the coordinator and management committee working in unison who enable research findings in adult education to be adapted to classroom teaching so that learning can function optimally. It is the coordinator and management committee who breathe life into research discoveries and put them to practical use.

Had there been no input from management, adult education would have made little progress since the days of the old bush school. Today, adult education agencies, through their coordinators and management committees, manage their resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Successful coordinators and management committees blend research results with teaching and learning and at the same time provide the necessary resources for the classroom teacher and students. Adult education proceeds more smoothly as a result. However, 'research', 'teaching' and 'learning' cannot stand alone as separate entities. It is impossible for the individual researcher, teacher or student acting alone to acquire the essential educational resources. Without the management function the whole adult educational process becomes severely restricted. I suggest our equation for this

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conference should read: 'Research, *Management*, Teaching, Learning: Making Connections in Adult Education.'

When research findings are published they point to ways in which agency managements can make improvements in their field. It is then the task of the agency's management to coordinate resources for the ensuing teaching and learning processes.

The literature on the management of adult education agencies is poor. It is lacking when it comes to giving fine details about the roles of coordinators and management committees. The literature is non-existent when it comes to the review of agencies in a rural setting within Australia operating in a harsh economic environment. A rural setting and a harsh economic environment were the background to this present research.

The harsh economic background was caused by an economic recession combined with a crippling drought. Dwindling government funding to the rural agencies meant fewer course enrolments and this resulted in decreased agency income. Enrolments at one stage decreased by 26% in comparison to the same period the previous year. Management performances of the various agencies became very erratic.

The purpose of this descriptive study then was to identify and describe how coordinators and management committees successfully manage adult education agencies in rural New South Wales during periods of adverse conditions. This research problem raised three related questions:

1. What is the nature of the coordinator's administrative function in a successful adult education agency?

2. What is the nature of the management committee's administrative function in a successful adult education agency?

3. What is the working relationship between the coordinator and the management committee in the successful adult education agency?

The sample of four agencies was selected with the purpose of finding respondents in the agencies who were information-rich. These information-rich individuals served to shed light on issues of central importance to this study. The sample was selected with extremes in mind. At one extreme were two agencies who were deemed to be successful in their management. At the other extreme were two agencies deemed to be marginal or non successful in their management. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews.

A discussion of the findings on these three questions now follows.

1. What is the nature of the coordinator's administrative function in a successful adult education agency?

Six administrative functions of a coordinator emerged from this question; four of these involved leadership. These four indicated that in regard to leadership successful coordinators, contrasted with their non-successful counterparts:

- display more vigour and direction in their leadership qualities;
- display a more entrepreneurial spirit;
- have a more intuitive grasp of their field;
- are more people-oriented.

This aspect of the research indicates the importance of leadership in the coordinator's role, and confirms the comment by Courtenay (1990) that leadership of an agency is the most critical administrative function.

One quality a coordinator must possess is **leadership which incorporates vigour and direction**. Interviewees stated that not only did coordinators need to concentrate on such things as programme productivity and priority setting, and have an understanding of organisational and administrative behaviour, but also there must be attention given to the type of leadership needed to cope with the needs of an agency in a changing environment, with the bottom line focus on how best to accomplish those things which they felt were important. They also felt that a leader must be proactive, actively looking for problems to solve and opportunities to explore.

It would seem that the successful coordinator takes the role of coordinator almost to an extreme. One such coordinator was portrayed by a committee member in terms where it seemed, from the way her actions were described, that she owned the agency and was running it as her own private business. It seems appropriate at this point that a quote be used to describe succinctly the behaviour of the coordinator. These words were used to illustrate the coordinator's enthusiasm:

> She runs this place like it was her own. That is a very special skill for someone who is running an adult education agency, and I think that is why we are so successful - because Sue runs it like it is her own. I don't honestly believe that this agency or any other agency could get a better coordinator. I mean, Sue does far more than I would expect any coordinator to do.

With an image such as this in her agency she was able to generate a style of leadership which had such vigour and direction that it encouraged others to follow with enthusiasm.

Exploring a new opportunity then converting it into action brings with it a measure of risk - that is, it calls for an **entrepreneurial spirit**. Risk is part and parcel of entrepreneurship. However, in order to achieve agency goals, at times risks have to be taken. Successful coordinators have the capacity to judge accurately what is needed in the market place and then present the innovation in the form of a course. The risk is taken after thought is given to how it will be controlled.

Successful coordinators in this study confirmed the views of Van Fleet (1991) that entrepreneurs are managers who plan, organise, lead and control their organisations. The non-successful coordinators reported that they became less inclined to be entrepreneurial during harsh economic times because of the risk of failure. This finding is in line with the view of Harvey-Jones (1993), that a person's lack of talent forces them to react poorly during an economic recession. He contended that the less-good talent freezes into a state of inaction and a decision is made not to take any risks.

Intuition was another function which was revealed in this study. Intuition is a form of decision making. Decisions are made by coordinators on a daily, routine basis which have an element of uncertainty about them. Some of these decisions by the successful coordinators often defy logic and can be seen as being the result of intuition. Jackson (1993) describes this type of within the manager as a "gut feeling." There is an instinct within the coordinator that they can integrate ideas, situations and information then merge these into courses which satisfy student needs. Success seems to follow naturally. This study revealed that successful coordinators possessed this intuitive grasp of their field and, as Robbins (1994) explained, these coordinators quickly see beyond the surface appearance of things and dig into the underlying meaning and essence of a situation to make positive decisions.

The successful coordinator must be **people-oriented**. The successful coordinator must be able to listen to others, be friendly and approachable, help others and show concern for those who are in need, and possess a high level of interpersonal skills. All these characteristics were used to describe this study's successful coordinators. All four coordinators recognised the need to be people-oriented. However, the non-successful coordinators rated this skill lower than the successful coordinators, who believed that people skills were the most important. Adult education is a pursuit which is involved

with people; indeed, Luthans (1988) claims that the effective manager devotes eighty-one percent of available time to human-oriented activities. To be successful in an endeavour such as adult education the coordinator must be a "people person".

Another administrative function of the successful coordinator revealed in this study was that of **communication**. In order to be successful the coordinator must exhibit a high level of communication skills. Ability as a communicator assists the coordinator to establish a network of contacts and this enables the required information to flow. The network created through communication skills enables the coordinator to develop a relationship with current and potential students which eventually leads to larger class sizes and success for the agency. Robbins (1994) reported that communication absorbed forty-four percent of the effective manager's time. Luthans (1988) outlined the communication process as exchanging routine information and processing paperwork, conveying the results of meetings, reading and writing reports, routine financial reporting and book-keeping and general desk work. This study showed that all of these factors formed part of the routine of the successful coordinator, who used a high level of communication skills to acquire information through personal contact with other adult educators.

Finally, the successful coordinator must possess some degree of **financial, economic and staffing management skills.** The concept of these skills is embraced by Knox's (1979) category of "Acquisition and allocation of resources." This study revealed that the successful coordinator needs all the skills outlined by authors such as Dahl (1980), Miller (1987) and Shipp (1982). Shipp in particular states the need for coordinators to have sound financial management skills in order that agencies remain viable and this study bore that out. In New South Wales, in the relatively short period of about twenty years, adult education has moved from a schools base, with the schoolteacher supervising a narrow curriculum and collecting small sums of money, to today's agencies, usually situated in their own buildings, presenting a much broader curriculum, and demanding extremely finance-conscious coordinators in order to achieve their objectives. Successful coordinators today are handling budgets involving millions of dollars. This is a far cry from the situation which prevailed a few short years ago and indicates the need for a multi-skilled coordinator to head up today's agency.

2. What is the nature of the management committee's administrative function in a successful adult education agency.

The management committee's administration in this study consisted of three different functions. The first was that the management committee must have a chairperson with **strong leadership qualities**. Committee members, when they respected the leadership qualities of their chairperson, were able to blend together as a team and make decisions with confidence. Committee members in the successful agencies recognised the value of a strong chairperson for the good conduct of their agency whilst, at the same time, the presidents were very much aware of the need to build on committee enthusiasm and maintain a flow of effective decisions. Knowles (1980) saw the effectiveness of a committee being dependent upon the leadership provided by the president. This is seconded by Kowalski (1988) who asserted that the success of a committee relied upon clear definitions of role, functions, and responsibilities being understood by all concerned. One president remarked that he endeavoured to provide a leadership which encouraged the committee to be pro-active and give them all a smell of success. This success theme was discussed by McLoughlin (1986) when he examined non-profit, public sector organisations which provide "human services". He claimed that successful non-profit organisations are successful because they have successful persons at the helm. He added that an organisation of this type will be great only if it can get a "great individual" to lead it. This study showed that effective chairs possess the leadership qualities which, when on display at agency meetings, not only encourages members to voice their opinions in the decision-making process but also presents the meetings with information and new opportunities.

The presidents, in providing leadership for their committees in a progressive manner, cannot act alone. The second administrative function of the president and the committee is **actively to recruit new members by 'head-hunting.'** For a committee to operate effectively Cornwall and Perlman

(1990) claim that there needs to be a form of support, co-operation and entrepreneurial thinking from colleagues at the committee level. One possible way of getting a committee to operate more effectively along these lines is for the president and/or coordinator to use their influence to get the committee to headhunt new members (as outlined by George: 1987) and then nominate them for selection to fill vacancies on the committee when they occur rather than leave the selection process to the "old boys" network. The successful management committees in this study actively pursued people who possessed specific skills and then pressed them to join the committee. The most frequently headhunted person possessed financial skills such as accounting.

The third function of the management committee was to **seek innovation and development** for their agency rather than hope for survival through crisis management. Operating in the harsh environment in which the agencies had found themselves had caused vastly different reactions in their management styles. The successful agencies generated new courses which had the effect of creating additional income. In one agency an innovation saw the development of three new sub-committees whose role it was to channel information and ideas into the general committee. This is an example of an organisation adapting to a changing environment. Adaptation to the environment by organisations was defined by Barney and Griffin (1992) as "anticipating and adjusting to the impact that the environment is likely to have on their economic performance." Additionally, Moorhead and Griffin (1992) noted that "to adapt successfully, a social system must be aware of its environment, understand how that environment is changing, and make the appropriate adjustments." This means that for organisations such as adult education agencies to remain viable they must adapt to changes in their environment and involve themselves in some type of renewal.

When committees fail to make adjustments in their approach to their business there is always the distinct possibility that problems will arise. One such problem concerns the way in which management committees approach perceived difficulties. The lack of committee adjustment to difficulties and a failure to innovate and take appropriate measures can suddenly plunge a committee into what might be called 'survival mode' and crisis management. A non-successful agency in which several interviewees had expressed the opinion that their committee had been in crisis mode during this period held committee meetings which spanned one hour. It is difficult to imagine how an agency trying to survive a crisis can conduct its business effectively with meetings which only last an hour.

3. What is the working relationship between the coordinator and the management committee in the successful adult education agency?

This question revealed two administrative requirements. First, there is an **effective partnership between coordinator and management committee** in the form of trust, cooperation and teamwork. Successful agencies rely on the coordinator and committee working together as partners. In order to achieve agency goals there must be a spirit of teamwork and support for each other. If there is any other type of relationship then as Wolf (1990) states, there is a strained "we/they" atmosphere permeating the internal operations of the organisation. In this situation Wolf claims that the authority of the coordinator is undermined and coordinators are not in a position to reprimand committee members who are out of line and so they rely on the chair to do so.

There is a separation of roles in adult education agencies. Management committees are responsible for the focus on policies, plans and objectives. The president needs leadership skills to help the committee achieve its objectives. Working hand in glove with the committee is the coordinator who is responsible for stimulating, facilitating, guiding and assessing change efforts. All of this is done by the coordinator through what White and Belt (1980) see as a leadership provided by planning, organising and evaluating. This study showed that the successful management committees provide the power to the coordinator to carry out their objectives and strategies and at the same time provides resources so that the coordinator can achieve those goals. For all of this there needs to be high mutual trust between both parties.

The second administrative requirement is a **parity of esteem between committee and coordinator** rather than passive subordination. Coordinators are hired by the committee and must report to them. Wolf (1990) notes the relationship between committee and coordinator and outlines several scenarios which have been known to create problems with the working relationship between the two parties. In this study there did not appear to be any difficulties with the working relationship between coordinator and management committee in the successful agencies. Both parties were of the opinion that they had a working relationship which was based on trust, cooperation and teamwork. This type of relationship enabled them to achieve the goals of the agency.

An overall feature of the findings in this study was the importance of leadership. Leadership plays a vital role in an agency being successful. When the coordinator possesses leadership qualities imbued with vigour and direction, and works in unison with a president who has a leadership style which induces confidence from the committee, then the agency has a firm basis for success. These factors, together with a coordinator and management committee who afford each other equal status and esteem, are the essential requirements of a successful adult education agency. For all of these reasons, *management* must be included as an integral factor in our *'research, teaching, learning'* equation.

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